Semiotics for Beginners

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Criticisms of Semiotic Analysis

Other than as 'the study of signs' there is relatively little agreement amongst semioticians themselves as to the scope and methodology of semiotics. In the worst forms of critical practice what passes for 'semiotic analysis' is little more than a pretentious form of literary criticism based on grand assertions. This kind of abuse has earned semiotics an unenviable reputation in some quarters as the last refuge for academic charlatans. Criticisms of structuralist semiotics have led some theorists to abandon semiotics altogether, whilst others have sought to merge it with new perspectives. It is difficult to offer a critique of a shifting target which changes its form so fluidly as it moves.

Semiotics is often criticized as 'imperialistic', since some semioticians appear to regard it as concerned with, and applicable to, anything and everything. Semiotic analysis is just one of many techniques which may be used to explore sign practices. As with any other process of mediation, it suits some purposes better than others. Semiotics does not, for instance, lend itself to quantification, a function to which *content analysis* is far better adapted (which is not to suggest that the two techniques are incompatible, as many semioticians seem to assume). Semiotic approaches make certain kinds of questions easier to ask than others: they do not in themselves shed light on how people in particular social contexts actually interpret media texts, which may require ethnographic approaches. Semioticians do not always make explicit the limitations of their techniques, and semiotics is sometimes uncritically presented as a general-purpose tool. Saussurean semiotics is based on a linguistic model but not everyone agrees that it is productive to treat photography and film, for instance, as 'languages'. Paul Messaris disputes that we need to learn to 'read' the formal codes of photographic and audio-visual media, arguing that the resemblance of their images to observable reality is not merely a matter of cultural convention: 'to a substantial degree the formal conventions encountered in still or motion pictures should make a good deal of sense even to a first-time viewer' (Messaris 1994, 7). John Corner has criticised the way in which some semioticians have treated almost anything as a code, whilst leaving the details of such codes inexplicit (particularly in the case of ideological codes) (Corner 1980).

Sometimes semioticians present their analyses as if they were purely objective 'scientific' accounts rather than subjective interpretations. Yet few semioticians seem to feel much need to provide empirical evidence for particular interpretations, and much semiotic analysis is loosely impressionistic and highly unsystematic. Some semioticians seem to choose examples which illustrate the points they wish to make rather than applying semiotic analysis to an extensive random sample (Leiss *et al.* 1990, 214). Jack Solomon suggests that the central principles of semiotics 'prevent it from being a science - that is, something with universal validity' (Solomon 1988, 232). William Leiss and his colleagues argue that a major disadvantage of semiotics is that 'it is heavily dependent upon the skill of the individual analyst'. Less skilful practitioners 'can do little more than state the obvious in a complex and often pretentious manner' (Leiss *et al.* 1990, 214). Certainly, in some cases, semiotic analysis seems little more than an excuse for interpreters to display the appearance of mastery through the use of jargon which excludes most people from participation. In practice, semiotic analysis invariably consists of individual readings. We are seldom presented with the commentaries of several analysts on the same text, to say nothing of evidence of any kind of consensus amongst different semioticians. Few semioticians make their analytical strategy sufficiently explicit for others to apply it either to the examples used or to others. Structuralist semioticians tended to assume that their own interpretations reflected a general consensus: they made no allowance for alternative readings. Semioticians who reject the investigation of other people's interpretations privilege what has been called the 'élite interpreter' - though socially-oriented semioticians would insist that the exploration of people's interpretive practices is fundamental to semiotics.

Some semiotic analysis has been criticised as nothing more than an abstract and 'arid formalism' which is preoccupied with classification. Susan Hayward declares that structuralist semiotics can lead to 'a crushing of the aesthetic response through the weight of the theoretical framework' (Hayward 1996, 352). Semiotic analysis often shows a tendency to downplay the *affective* domain - though the study of connotations ought to include the sensitive exploration of highly variable and subjective emotional nuances.

In structuralist semiotics the focus is on *langue* rather than *parole* (Saussure's terms), on formal *systems* rather than on *processes* of use and production. Valentin Volosinov argues that the prime determinant of a sign is not its relationship to other signs but rather the social context of its use (Fiske 1992, 299). Semiotics can appear to suggest that meaning is purely explicable in terms of determining textual structures. Such a stance is subject to the same criticisms as linguistic determinism. Purely structuralist semiotics does not address processes of production, audience interpretation or even authorial intentions. It ignores particular practices, institutional frameworks and the cultural, social, economic and political context. Even Roland Barthes, who argues that texts are

codified to encourage a reading which favours the interests of the dominant class, confines his attention to the internal textual organization and does not engage with the social context of interpretation (Gardiner 1992, 149-50). It cannot be assumed that preferred readings will go unchallenged (Hall 1980). The sociologist Don Slater has criticised the *functionalism* of structuralist semiotics, arguing that material practices such as the 'reading of texts' must be related to the social relations which give rise to the 'politics of cultural practice'. Functionalism, he comments, 'admits of thoroughly internal solutions to problems of determination' (Slater 1983, 259). David Buxton also argues that structuralist approaches 'deny... social determination' and he insists that 'the text must be related to something other than its own structure: in other words, we must explain how it comes to be *structured*' (Buxton 1990, 13). We must consider not only *how* signs signify (structurally) but also *why* (socially); structures are not causes. The relationships between signifiers and their signifieds may be ontologically arbitrary but they are not socially arbitrary.

Dominic Strinati notes:

> How can we know that a bunch of roses signifies passion unless we also know the intention of the sender and the reaction of the receiver, and the kind of relationship they are involved in? If they are lovers and accept the conventions of giving and receiving flowers as an aspect of romantic, sexual love, then we might accept... [this] interpretation. But if we do this, we do so on the basis not of the sign but of the social relationships in which we can locate the sign... The roses may also be sent as a joke, an insult, a sign of gratitude, and so on. They may indicate passion on the part of the sender but repulsion on the part of the receiver; they may signify family relations between grandparents and grandchildren rather than relations between lovers, and so on. They might even connote sexual harrassment. (Strinati 1995, 125).

Synchronic analysis studies a phenomenon as if it were frozen at one moment in time; *diachronic* analysis focuses on change over time. Insofar as semiotics tends to focus on synchronic rather than diachronic analysis, it underplays the dynamic nature of media conventions (for instance, television conventions change fairly rapidly compared to conventions for written English). It can also underplay dynamic changes in the cultural myths which signification both alludes to and helps to shape (Fiske 1982, 93-5; Fiske & Hartley 1978, 43). Purely structuralist semiotics ignores process and historicity - unlike historical theories like Marxism.

As Hodge and Tripp note, there can hardly be 'an exhaustive semiotic analysis... because a "complete" analysis... would still be located in particular social and historical circumstances' (Hodge & Tripp 1986, 27). This relates to the most

fundamental criticism of semiotics, which comes from Jacques Derrida, who (in Jack Solomon's words) argues that

> If, as the semioticians insisted, all human knowledge is encoded in ideologically motivated systems of signs, then every attempt to crack the codes of human knowledge can only produce another code... To achieve a final interpretation of some cultural phenomenon, you'd have to be able to transcend the entire mythological system in which you dwell. And that, semiotics itself argues, is something you can't do. It's like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.
> (Solomon 1988, 232-3)

The phrase 'making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar' is now a recurrent feature of artistic and photographic manifestos and of creative 'brainstorming' sessions in many fields. Whilst the origin of the concept can be traced to Romantic theorists such as Wordsworth and Coleridge (and the notion is of course closely associated with Surrealism), its adoption by semioticians probably owes most to Russian Formalist criticism (Lemon & Reis 1965). Victor Shklovsky argued in 1916 that the key function of art was *estrangement*, *defamiliarization* or 'making strange' (*ostranenie*) - i.e. renewing our perception of everyday things and events which are so familiar that our perception of them has become routinized (Nöth 1990, 307-8; Watney 1982; Stam *et al.* 1992, 10-11). Russian Formalism was a key influence on the development of semiotics in Eastern Europe, and the legacy of 'making the familiar strange' is an important one for semiotics. However, as Simon Watney notes, the strategy of *defamiliarization* is itself, of course, ideological and has been associated with the notion that the tactic of surprise may serve to banish 'distortions' so that we may 'objectively' perceive 'reality' (Watney 1982, 173-4). Clearly the strategy of 'making the familiar strange' needs to be coupled with an awareness that whilst we may be able to bypass one set of conventions we may never escape the framing of experience by convention.

Mikhail Bakhtin

John Sturrock notes that some semioticians, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, have used semiotics for the 'revelatory' political purpose of 'demystifying' society, and that such approaches can lead to 'loaded' 'readings' of society simply as an ideological conspiracy by one social class against the rest (Sturrock 1986, 91). Sturrock favoured 'a more or less neutral' approach, but few theorists would be likely to accept the possibility of such neutrality. Marxist theorists in particular emphasize 'the politics of signification' - signification cannot be neutral ('value-free'). Structuralist theorists tend to assume that we can use semiotic analysis to

look beyond signs to an 'underlying' reality, but post-structuralist theorists have argued that this is impossible - we cannot stand outside our sign systems.

Guy Cook argues that there is a tendency for some semioticians to represent communication as a simple process of 'decoding':

> The popular phrase *Decoding Advertisements* was first used by Judith Williamson as the title of a book published in 1978, and it has been echoed widely in courses and publications ever since (Umiker-Sebeok 1987: 249-335). The essence of Williamson's approach is to unveil through analysis what she calls the 'real' meaning of the words and images of an ad, and the 'real world' to which the 'unreal' images of the ad refer (1978: 47). In this there is a clear assumption that 'reality' is not only quite distinct from 'fiction' but also morally superior... Though the decoding approach on occasion yields interesting results (in practice often rather obvious ones), a drawback of the approach is its hasty satisfaction that such equivalences constitute a complete analysis. This leads it to jettison all consideration of what is particular to the surface of discourse, or of a particular signifier, and thus miss much of complexity, skill and humour. (Cook 1992, 63-4)

Cook adds that 'a weakness of the semiotic approach is its exclusive devotion to similarities, and then an air of finality once these similarities are observed, which blinds it to what is unique' (*ibid.*, 70). He adds that a focus on 'underlying structures' neglects 'surface forms' which may be important in themselves (*ibid.*, 71). His criticisms are clearly directed at *structuralist* semiotics.

Varda Langholz Leymore, who herself employed a structuralist approach, argued that:

> Semiological studies derive a great inspiration from linguistics, yet in most cases they fall short of complying with probably its most revolutionary aspect, the infinite creativity of the base rules. In most semiological studies the identification of structure is tantamount to creating formal schemata into which all individual members of the system may, following some rules, be reduced. However, the converse is not true. The systems are incapable of generating one single example which belongs to their universe of discourse, in the sense that Chomsky is able to generate sentences. In other words, the rules enabling one to 'transform back' from the deep structure to the surface structure, are not specified. In this sense most semiological studies are not generative but static. (Langholz Leymore 1975, 15)

Many of the criticisms of semiotics are directed at a form of semiotics to which few contemporary semioticians adhere. Whilst some semioticians have retained a structuralist concern with formal systems (mainly focusing on detailed studies of

narrative, film and television editing and so on), many have become more concerned with 'social semiotics' (Hodge & Kress 1988). A key concern of social semioticians is with what Stephen Heath calls the 'specific signifying practices' of the makers and users of media texts (see Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 55; see also Fiske on 'ideology and signification'; Fiske 1982, 150-151). Such 'reformed' semioticians practise 'poststructuralist' semiotics, focusing on what one has called 'situated social semiosis' (Jensen 1995, 57). This at least is the rhetoric of social semioticians, but the extent to which social semiotics has in practice met the concerns of sociologists is debatable.

Victor Burgin notes that, of several discourses, 'Marxism and psychoanalysis [the latter particularly derived from the work of Jacques Lacan] have most informed [poststructuralist] semiotics in its moves to grasp the determinations of history and the subject in the production of meaning' (Burgin 1982, 144-5). Strinati argues that semiotics has been used 'to render the Marxist theory of ideology less deterministic and instrumental. However, this still tends to underestimate the ways in which what is produced is itself subject to conflicts and negotiations, and how the meanings produced may not be uniform, consistent, unambiguous or reducible to a coherent dominant ideology' (Strinati 1995, 127).

Contemporary apologists have noted that there is nothing new about the emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics. The roots of social semiotics can be traced to the early theorists. Saussure himself wrote of semiotics as 'a science that studies the life of signs within society' and the notion of semiosis as a process is central to Peirce's thinking. However, it has to be acknowledged that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of semiotic practice.

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